



STATE OF VERMONT
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Department of Education Releases Governance Survey Results

MONTPELIER – The Vermont Department of Education today released the results of a random survey of Vermont households designed to gather public input on the governance structure of Vermont’s public schools.

The survey, sent to 4,000 Vermonters, is the second piece of a two-part public engagement process led by Education Commissioner Richard Cate. In May 2006 Cate released a white paper, designed to stimulate discussion, outlining a rationale for changing the governance model of the education system in Vermont. The first part of the public engagement process was 30 facilitated public meetings the department held across the state. These meetings were held at local schools between January and May. A total of 882 individuals attended these meetings, with an average of just over 29 participants per meeting. About half of the participants identified themselves as school board members, while 14 percent were parents and 21 percent were community members not connected to the school system. The remainder of the participants identified themselves as educators or school administrators or put themselves in the category of “other.”

At most of the public engagement meetings, the participants identified more advantages than disadvantages of the current supervisory union structure. For the commissioner’s proposal to reduce the number of school districts, participants generally identified more disadvantages than advantages. Common themes that emerged included:

- A desire to retain “local control” of the schools.
- Concern that, under the commissioner’s proposal, the voting power of people in smaller communities would be reduced because of the constitutional requirement for one-person, one-vote.
- That consolidation of school districts would result in a loss of sense of community and result in the closure of small schools.
- That community members have a closer connection to the school board members under the current governance system.

The participants did identify some potential advantages to the commissioner’s proposal, including:

- Increased efficiency resulting from having a superintendent reporting to just one school board.
- Improved focus on a pre-K – 12 curriculum for all students.
- Improved communication between the school board and school administrators and improved clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities.

Generally, however, one would have to conclude that the majority of participants at the public engagement meetings favored keeping the current system of education governance in Vermont.

However, the random survey of Vermonters produced significantly different results than did the public engagement meetings. A total of 301 usable surveys were returned, which provided a survey margin of error of +/- 6 percent. Just over 78 percent of the survey respondents identified themselves as community members, while 3.7 percent were school board members. It is important to note that this school board member response rate compares to the fact that board members only make up about three tenths of one percent of Vermont's adult population. A majority of the respondents, 66.8 percent, think that the school governance system in the state needs to be changed, while 20.6 percent disagree; 11.3 percent have no opinion on the matter (statistics do not add up to 100 percent because a small number of people did not respond to all the questions).

In addition:

- 48.1 percent of respondents think that the commissioner's proposal would serve students better than the current system of supervisory unions, while 24.9 percent disagree and 23.3 percent have no opinion.
- More than half of respondents (54.5 percent) think that Commissioner Cate's proposal would make more efficient use of financial resources than the current system, while 20.6 percent disagree and 22.9 percent have no opinion.
- 35.2 percent of respondents think that the current supervisory union structure serves the needs of students well, while 53.5 percent disagree and 9.6 percent have no opinion.
- A little less than one-fourth of respondents (22.3 percent) stated that supervisory unions make efficient use of financial resources, while 62.7 percent disagree and 11.6 percent have no opinion.

In addition to the meetings and the survey, over 100 public comments were received via e-mail and postal mail from community members, educators and other interested parties since the release of the white paper. The comments received by these means have almost all been in favor of some degree of change to the education governance structure.

This summer the commissioner and department staff are gathering information about school governance in other states, and researching areas of concern raised at the public engagement meetings. This information will further inform the commissioner's recommendations, which will be part of the complete report on Education Governance that he will present to the Legislature, the State Board of Education and the Governor, no later than December 1, 2007.

For more information, visit <http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/dept/governance.html>.

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